

**God has a name  
What you believe  
about God  
will shape who  
you become  
by John Mark  
Comer**



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*God Has a Name*

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**Note to the reader:**

Like most English translations of the Bible, the NIV translates the Hebrew name for God, “Yahweh,” into English as the title “the LORD.” For reasons that will become clear as you read, we added Yahweh in brackets. Each time you read it, remember that God has a name.



## Exodus 34v4–7

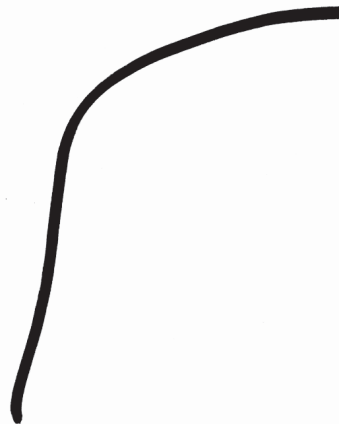
**So Moses chiseled out two stone tablets like the first ones and went up Mount Sinai early in the morning, as the LORD [Yahweh] had commanded him; and he carried the two stone tablets in his hands. Then the LORD [Yahweh] came down in the cloud**

**and stood there with  
him and proclaimed  
his name, the LORD  
[Yahweh]. And he  
passed in front of  
Moses, proclaiming,  
“The LORD [Yahweh],  
the LORD [Yahweh],  
the compassionate  
and gracious God,  
slow to anger,  
abounding in love  
and faithfulness,**

**maintaining love  
to thousands, and  
forgiving wickedness,  
rebellion and sin.  
Yet he does not  
leave the guilty  
unpunished; he  
punishes the  
children and their  
children for the  
sin of the parents  
to the third and  
fourth generation.”**

# Prologue







# The God on top of the mountain

Last week, an atheist came up to me and asked how I could believe in a God who made parents eat their children.

Naturally, I was a little confused. A lot of people have odd ideas about God, but *cannibalism*? That was new.

I was speaking at an event, and the theme that weekend was the Bible—in all its weirdness and mystery and drama and truth and lies and violence and nonviolence and sarcastic donkeys and dying Messiahs and what-in-the-world-is-up-with-*this* story-ness.

The event was supposed to be for pastors and church leader types, but a number of atheists crashed the party.

It turns out a lot of people have issues with the Bible.

Even more of us have issues with God.

So this guy, Micah, comes up to me with a quote from *Leviticus*. (Why is it always *Leviticus*?) He had accidentally torn a line out of context and misread it. It happens.

We had a nice chat about how God isn't actually a cannibal, and then I had to go up on stage and teach. But it struck me later that Micah the atheist and myself the pastor were both talking about God, but the two of us had radically different ideas about *who God is*.

For me, God is the Creator of all that is good, beautiful, and true—the God I read about in the Scriptures and then see in Jesus of Nazareth.

For Micah, God is a sadistic monster who made ancient Hebrews eat their young.

Same Bible, *very different* God.

Then a few weeks back, my son Jude asked me about the resurrection of Jesus. He wanted to know if Jesus was a zombie, like in *World War Z*.

Jesus zombie?<sup>1</sup>

We act like the English word “God” is a common denominator, but it's not.

When we talk about God, it turns out we're all over the map.

In the West, we still live in a hangover from our Christianized past. There was a time when you could say “God,” and people would immediately think of the God we read about in the

Scriptures and see in Jesus. Most people would even come to the same basic conclusions about this God.

That time has long since gone the way of the earth.

Today, when I say “God,” you might think any number of things, depending on your country of birth, language, religion, church experience, background—and, of course, whether or not you have cable.

All of this brings me to the question at the heart of this book:

### **Who is God?**

I’m not writing this book to prove that God exists. If you’re an atheist like my new friend Micah, welcome to the table. We’re glad you’re here. Just know that I won’t go into a litany of reasons that I’m right and you’re wrong. There are a lot of people *way* smarter than me—the kind with extra letters after their name—who’ve already had a crack at that.

I can only speak out of my own life, and, for me, God’s existence was never the question. I’ve been down the road of doubt, had a crisis of faith—a few actually—thought long and hard about Jesus, and had a list of questions about the Bible stretching to Florida and back (I live in Portland—it’s a long trek). But for me, the question was never whether God exists. The way I’m wired, that was axiomatic and self-evident.

Have you been outside recently?

For me, the far more interesting question was always, “What in the world is God *like*?”

Is God a he?

Or a she?

Come on, sisters . . .

Is God a they?

Or an it?

Is the tree in my front yard full of the divine?

*Am I?*

Is God even a person? Or is he/she/they/it/the tree/maybe-even-me more of an energy force or a state of mind?

Or is Micah right? Is God just a myth? A carryover from a world that all smart, thinking people have moved on from? Now that we have science and technology, “we know better.”

Let’s assume for now that there *is* some kind of an invisible-but-real being who made everything, and for now let’s call this being “God.” If so, what is this God *like*?

Kind, or cruel?

Close by and involved in my life, or far-off and aloof?

Strict and uptight like a fundamentalist preacher, or free and easygoing like a good, educated progressive?

Does he vote Democratic? Or is he a Republican? Maybe Green Party?

Or how about this one: Is God even good for the world anymore? Fewer and fewer people answer yes. What if God and religion are just an endless source of violence and hatred and bigotry and hypocrisy and really bad music?

Who is this “God” we love, hate, worship, blaspheme, trust, fear, believe in, doubt, cuss in the name of, bow to, make jokes about, and most of the time just ignore?

I would argue that how you answer this question will *define* you.

The twentieth-century writer A. W. Tozer made a stunning claim: “What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.”<sup>2</sup>

Really?

*The* most important thing?

More than our gender or sexuality or ethnicity or family of origin or the town we grew up in or where we went to college

or our tax bracket or whether our sport is American football or *futbol* football?

Absolutely.

Here's a truth that cuts across the whole of the universe:  
**we become like what we worship.**

Tozer went on to write, “We tend by a secret law of the soul to move toward our mental image of God . . . Were we able to extract from any man a complete answer to the question, ‘What comes to mind when you think about God?’ we might predict with certainty the spiritual future of that man.”<sup>3</sup>

Put another way, what you think about God will shape your destiny in life.

If you think of God as homophobic, racist, and mad at the world, this distorted vision of reality will shape you into a religious bigot who is—wait for it—*homophobic, racist, and mad at the world.*

If you think of God as a Left-Coast, educated, LGBTQ-affirming progressive, that will shape you into the stereotype of the wealthy bohemian with the “We Will Not Tolerate Intolerance” bumper sticker on the back of your hybrid.

(Don't take that as a slam. I'm writing about half of my neighbors and friends.)

If you think of God as the cosmic version of a life coach, there to “maximize your life,” that will shape you into a self-helpy yuppie, even if you dress it up and call it following Jesus.

You see what I’m getting at?

The ISIS terrorist beheading the infidel, the prosperity gospel celebrity preacher getting out of his Hummer after late-night drinks with Kanye West, the Westborough Baptist picketer outside a military funeral screaming “God hates f—s!”, the Hindu sacrificing a goat to Shiva, the African witch doctor sacrificing a little boy, the U.S. Army sniper praying to God before he takes the shot, the peace activist risking her neck to stop *another* war because she believes in Jesus’ teachings on enemy love, the gay singer who stands up at the Grammys and says thank you to God for his song about a one-night stand, the Catholic nun giving up a “normal life” to live in poverty and work for social change—all of these men and women do what they do because of what they believe about God.

So clearly, what we think about God *matters*.

*Who God is* has profound implications for *who we are*.

Here’s the problem: we usually end up with a God who looks an awful lot like *us*.

As the saying goes, “God created man in his own image. And man, being a gentleman, returned the favor.”<sup>4</sup>

There is a human bent in *all* of us to make God in our own image.

My friend Scot McKnight is a New Testament professor in Chicago. For years, he taught a class on Jesus, and he would start every semester with two surveys. The first was a set of questions about the student: what they like, dislike, believe, and so on. The second was the same set of questions, but this time about Jesus. He told me that 90 percent of the time, *the answers were exactly the same*.

That's telling, isn't it?

Here's how you know if you've created God in your own image: *he agrees with you on everything*. He hates all the people you hate. He voted for the person you voted for. If you're a Republican, so is he. If you're a Democrat, she is too. If you're passionate about \_\_\_\_\_, then God is passionate about \_\_\_\_\_. If you're open and elastic about sexuality, so is he. And above all, he's tame. You never get mad at him or blown away by him or scared of him. Because he's *controllable*.

And, of course, he's a figment of your imagination.

Often what we believe about God says more about *us* than it does about God. Our theology is like a mirror to the soul. It shows us what's deep inside.

Maybe the truth is that we want a God who is controllable because *we* want to be God. *We* want to be the authority on

who God is or isn't and what's right or wrong, but we want the mask of religion or spirituality to cover up the I-wanna-be-God reality.

The most ancient, primal temptation, going all the way back to Adam and Eve in the Garden, is to decide for ourselves what God is like, and whether we should live into his vision of human flourishing or come up with our own. All so we “will be like God, knowing good and evil.”<sup>5</sup>

This is why theology is so incredibly important.

The word *theology* comes from two Greek words—*theo*, meaning “God,” and *logos*, meaning “word.” Simply put, theology is a word about God. It's what comes to mind when we think about God.

It's not like some of us are into theology and others aren't. We *all* have a theology. We *all* have thoughts and opinions and convictions about God. Good, bad, right, wrong, brilliant, dangerous—we all theologize.

But the problem is that much of what we think about God is simply wrong.

I know that's blunt, but I don't really know how else to say it.

Much of what we read in the news or see on TV or pick up on the street about God and the way he works is wrong. Maybe not *all* wrong, but wrong enough to mess up how we live.

In the modern world, we start with the assumption that we know what God is like, and then we judge every religion or church or sermon or book based on our view of God.

A while back, I read an interview in *Rolling Stone* with a celebrity who said he grew up in the church but left it in college because he “couldn’t believe in a God who would limit sex to one man and one woman for life.”<sup>6</sup>

What was shocking to me wasn’t the sex part. This *is* the modern world after all. And the dude was a rock star . . .

What was shocking to me was the bizarre twist of logic.

*I couldn’t believe in a God who \_\_\_\_\_?*

As if what we think and feel about God is an accurate barometer for what he is actually like.

The Scripture writers come at it the other way around. From Moses to Matthew, they just assume *we have no idea what God is like*. In fact, that a lot of what we think about God is totally off base. If history teaches us anything, it’s that the majority are often wrong.

And don’t think that if you’re religious—or even if you’re a Christian—you’re off the hook. Jesus spent the bulk of his time helping religious people see that a lot of what they thought about God was wrong too.

*You've heard it said . . .*

*But I say to you . . .*

Or he would start a teaching by saying, “The kingdom of God is *like* . . .” and then tell a story that was radically out of step with how people in his day and age thought.

For Jesus and all the writers of Scripture, the starting point for all theology is the realization that:

**we don't know what God is like, *but we can learn.***

**But to learn, *we have to go to the source.***

And that means we need revelation. Otherwise we end up with all sorts of erroneous and goofy and untrue and maybe even toxic ideas about God.

By “revelation,” I don’t mean the last book of the Bible or foldout charts from the 1970s about the end of the world. I mean, God himself has to reveal to us what he’s like. He has to pull back the curtain of the universe and let you and me look inside. But here’s the thing: revelation, by definition, is usually a *surprise*. A twist in the story. A break from the status quo. So when God reveals himself, it’s almost always different from what we expect.

All of which leads us to Moses on the top of Mount Sinai.

Yup. That's where we're going.

I am a follower of Jesus, not a Muslim or Hindu or Buddhist or Jedi Knight (sadly). So everything I think about God is through the lens of the Scriptures and then Jesus himself.

Scripture is first and foremost a story. And it's a story about God. We want to make it a story about *us*—about how to get ahead in life or have great sex or up our portfolio or just be happy. And there are all sorts of “success principles” in the Bible, but honestly, that's just not what the story is about. If you strip the Bible down to the core, it's a story about God, and about how we as people relate to God.

And in the story, there are climactic moments when the door swings open and we get a brand-new, compelling, and at times terrifying vision of who God is.

Often these moments take place on a mountain.

If you've ever read the Bible, you know that the second book is called *Exodus*.<sup>7</sup> The setting for the book is Israel in the desert, en route from slavery in Egypt to freedom in a new land. But it's a bumpy ride, to say the least.

At the head of the people of God is the prophet Moses, who has a totally unique relationship with the Creator. We read that God “would speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend.”<sup>8</sup>

In Exodus 33, we get to eavesdrop on a conversation between Moses and God. Moses is asking for God to go with the Israelites every step of the way, and at one point he asks, “Now show me your glory.”<sup>9</sup>

In ancient Hebrew literature like *Exodus*, to speak of God’s glory was to speak of his *presence* and *beauty*.<sup>10</sup> Moses is asking to see God for who he really is. To see God in person.

For Moses, head knowledge isn’t enough. He wants to *experience* God.

God graciously tells Moses that he can’t see his face or he will die, “for no one may see me and live.”<sup>11</sup> But he’ll do him one better. God tells him, “I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the LORD [Yahweh], in your presence.”<sup>12</sup>

So *God*

has a *name*.

The next morning, Moses gets up early and climbs to the top of Mount Sinai. Then we read one of the most staggering paragraphs in the entire Bible.

**“The LORD [Yahweh] came down in the cloud and stood there with him and proclaimed his name, the LORD [Yahweh]. And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, ‘The LORD [Yahweh], the LORD [Yahweh],**

**the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation.”<sup>13</sup>**

This is one of those watershed moments when *everything* changes. It’s one of the few places in the entire Bible where God describes himself. Where he essentially says, “This is what I’m like.” Think of it as God’s self-disclosure statement, his press release to the world.<sup>14</sup>

Because of that, it’s quite possibly **the most quoted passage in the Bible, by the Bible.**<sup>15</sup>

The writers of the Bible circle back to this passage over and over and *over* again. *Dozens* of times. Moses and David and Jeremiah and Jonah—they quote it and allude to it and pray it and sing it and claim it and complain about it, but above all, they *believe* it.

This is ground zero for a theology of God.

But what’s striking to me is how very different this passage is from what you would expect.

For those of us who live in the West, we tend to think of God in the categories of philosophy. Pick up a book about God, and it’ll often start with the omnis . . .

God is omnipotent (he's all-powerful).

God is omniscient (he's all-knowing).

God is omnipresent (he's everywhere at once).

And all of that is true. I believe it.<sup>16</sup> But here's my hang-up: when God describes himself, he doesn't start with how powerful he is or how he knows everything there is to know or how he's been around since before time and space and there's no one else like him in the universe.

That's all true, but apparently, to God, it's not the most important thing.

When God describes himself, he starts with his *name*. Then he talks about what we call *character*. He's compassionate and gracious; he's slow to anger; he's abounding in love and faithfulness, and on down the list.

Which makes sense. Starting with the omnis is kind of like somebody asking about my wife, and me saying she's thirty-three years old, five foot one, 120 pounds, black hair, brown eyes, Latin American ancestry . . .

That's all true, but if you sat there as I was spouting off all these facts about my wife, my guess is that at some point, you would interrupt me and ask, "Yes, but what is she *like*? Tell me about *her*. What's her personality? Is she laid-back or type

A? Social or shy? What is she passionate about? What made you fall in love with her? What makes her, *her*?”

Most of the time, this is how we talk about God—we rattle off a bunch of stuff about God that is true; it’s just not the stuff that makes him, *him*.

That’s why this passage in Exodus is such a breath of fresh air. It turns out that God is better than any of us could imagine.

Now, maybe you’ve read this passage before in passing, or maybe it doesn’t ring a bell, but this passage is *central* to the story of the Bible. The rabbis make a huge deal out of it. In Jewish culture, it’s called the “Thirteen Attributes of Mercy,” and orthodox Jews pray it on holy days like Yom Kippur, before reading the Torah, and at the synagogue.<sup>17</sup> It’s like the John 3v16 of Judaism. If you’ve spent any time in the church, I’m sure you know John 3v16 like the back of your hand: “For God so loved the world . . .” But oddly enough, little or nothing is said in most churches about Exodus 34v6–7, even though it’s quite possibly the most quoted passage *in* the Bible, *by* the Bible.

Let’s change that, shall we?

Now, here’s the map for how we’ll come at this book . . .

We’ll talk about Exodus 34v6–7 *line by line*, taking time to soak our imaginations in each word. Each chapter will run something like this:

First, we'll talk about the original Hebrew. It's amazing what you can find when you dig into the language.

In TWO: Stories, we'll look at a story or two where this passage is quoted by later Scripture writers—stories where we see God display his character.

Then in THREE: Jesus, we'll fast-forward to Jesus. As a follower of Jesus, I very much believe that the God on top of Mount Sinai—the God of thunder and lightning and fire and smoke and a voice like a trumpet blast with a subwoofer in the back trunk—took on flesh and blood as the rabbi Jesus of Nazareth. And in Jesus, we see more clearly than ever before what God is like.

And finally, in FOUR: Us, we'll take a step back and think about what *who God is* means for *who we are*, and how it has the potential to reshape our lives from the ground up, unlocking the weights that hold us back from the full, deep, wide, boundless, difficult, invigorating, I-can't-believe-this-is-my-life kind of existence that God made us for and Jesus put on display.

Sound like a plan?

I hope you're sitting there and thinking to yourself, *Let's do this.*

Now, before we wrap up this opening salvo, let me put all my cards on the table.

Writing a book about God is terrifying. Who am *I*? Not only is it a daunting task, but think about what's at stake.

You could read this book and get a *wrong* view of God. That would be no small blunder on my part.

Or you could read this book and radically overhaul the way you relate to God, and in doing so, terraform your life from the ground up.

So as I sit here typing away, I feel both the pulse and throb of my heart beating through my chest—this sense that I *have* to write this. But I also feel this weight on my shoulders. This gravity and seriousness. This sense that I've got to get this right.

So I'll do my very best, but in the end, well, I'm not God.

And even if I *was* God, and this book was the transcript of my conversation with John Mark Comer, you would still walk away with questions, just like Moses did. And the poet Job. And the prophet Habakkuk. And the disciple Peter. And pretty much every single person who has ever had an encounter with the God who is totally Other.

There is a mystery to God that we never quite figure out. After all, we're dealing with a being who is totally unlike any other in the universe.

It's not like you'll finish reading this book, lean back in your chair, and think to yourself, *I got this*.

That's not how it works.

At one point in *Exodus*, Moses asks God his name, and God answers: "I AM WHO I AM."<sup>18</sup>

Well, that *really* clears things up, doesn't it?

God can be mysterious and vague and elusive and hard to catch at times. At the top of Mount Sinai was a cloud, not an engineering schematic. And everybody was invited up the mountain, but only Moses had the courage to step into the cloud.

So I say we start with Moses' prayer: *Show me your glory.*<sup>19</sup>

Even if all we see is a glimpse and all we hear is an echo, it's more than worth the trek.

But before we start the journey, ask yourself, *Do I have the courage to step into the cloud?*

It's one thing to read a book about God; it's another thing to scale a mountain in the middle of the desert and plunge headfirst into the darkness. To abandon yourself to a life of dangerous, risky, I-won't-stop-for-anything pursuit of God.

Hopefully this book will give you the courage to climb the mountain, no matter what you find at the top.